

Shooting the Gap

Engaging
Today's Faculty
in the Liberal Arts

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Collaboration within individual campuses may be the most important element in the new liberal arts interchange

IN "WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN COLLEGE: How Students View and Value Liberal Education" (2005), Debra Humphreys and Abigail Davenport present the findings of a study that asked high school and college students about their impressions of liberal education. Humphreys and Davenport found that, on

the whole, these students—including those already in college—did not have a working definition of a liberal education and did not spontaneously value the outcomes of such an education. In the course of the study, students were asked to consider a definition familiar to virtually everyone connected with liberal arts colleges (42):

Liberal education is a philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility. A liberal education comprises a curriculum that includes general education that provides students broad exposure to multiple disciplines and more in-depth study in at least one field or area of concentration.

Students responded positively to this definition, but it was evident that developing associated writing and other communication skills, information literacy, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and global perspective were not high on their list.

This result is not surprising. Faculty and administrators at many liberal arts colleges know that students tend to focus on specific course-oriented outcomes; and there is a gap between

that focus and the larger consideration of more general skills and capacities that liberal education purports to foster. However, as everyone would agree, the gap is unfortunate—not least because professional and corporate employers have been increasingly emphatic about the value of those very skills and capacities in adapting to life after college. Understanding that in "today's knowledge-fueled world, the quality of student learning is our key to the future" (43), Humphreys and Davenport conclude by calling upon the colleges to find ways to shoot this gap.

In the fall of 2005, interaction among representatives from the fourteen institutional members of the Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM) meeting at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, suggested that at least some colleges are finding those ways. They had come together for the third and final conference in a series funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation as part of a project entitled *Engaging Today's Students with the Liberal Arts*.¹ Two previous conferences in the spring of 2003 and the spring of 2005 had focused on first-year education and interdisciplinary, collaborative, and experiential learning; the consortium had also sponsored research related to institutional mission statements, distribution requirements, and student views of the education they were experiencing; and individual campuses had undertaken specific projects related to new initiatives in teaching and learning. The conference at Coe provided an opportunity for participants to share their findings and to deliberate together on the future of liberal education in institutions like theirs. The conference concluded

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with small-group discussion sessions, free from campus politics or financial constraints, which produced a collection of mission statements for the twenty-first-century American college. These statements reinforced an outcome that should be of interest to readers of *Liberal Education*.

In typical fashion, the conference series, with approximately a hundred attendees in each instance, had featured plenary speakers of note, including Richard J. Light, author of *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* (2001), and John Bransford, author of *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School* (2000). They had provided opportunities for collegial cross-pollination in a number of breakout sessions dealing with such topics

as the culture of today's students, first-year student orientation, off-campus study, and academic advising.

Campus projects were varied. Beloit assembled and published an institutional gathering of reflections on liberal education. Carleton and Cornell focused on writing across the curriculum. In diverse projects, St. Olaf, Knox, Monmouth, and Ripon looked at the first and/or second year. Coe reconsidered its program of general education.

Although many faculty members from the individual colleges learned a great deal, most of the interchange did not represent original educational thought. In their remarks, Light and Bransford offered syntheses of and comments on well-known studies; and from one



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point of view, most of the campus projects simply helped some colleges catch up to other colleges in their areas of focus. The fact that faculty mentoring is important to undergraduate students, that first-year students experience college in widely disparate ways, or that second-year students do not automatically synthesize and apply what they learn from one course to another is hardly front-page news. But considered in other ways, this three-year ACM project brought news of a different kind.

Toward a collaborative curriculum

When all is said and done, figuring out how to engage today's students in liberal arts study does not require advanced degrees in higher education. It simply requires that a college give this process very high priority in its rhetoric, its programming, and its attention to students

early and late. The real news in this consortial project was that at least some colleges are beginning to take hold in this line. To formulate more ways to engage students, faculty members themselves needed to be engaged beyond their departmental and divisional interests and think deliberately about undergraduate education across the curriculum and throughout the college career. On the individual campuses and in consortial consultation, ACM faculty members representing colleges with shared traditions and distinct personalities from Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and Colorado demonstrated that crucial engagement at the turn of a new century.

At one level, this is a trend like any other, succeeding the expansive curricula of the 1960s and 1970s, the area studies of the 1980s, or the rise of technology in the 1990s. At another level, it marks a sea change in how small-college faculty members view the liberal arts curriculum. In the old days, colleges were all about courses and majors; engaging in them, as the colleges announced and their alumni regularly testified, you also learned how to read, think, and write. But full-bodied institutional intentionality was lacking. As Ernest Pascarella (2005) has remarked, it was largely a faith-based operation with a very simplistic message: *come study here; you will learn and grow in our college, and as a result you will succeed in your later life*. Faculty members were believers, students were converts, and colleges were cathedrals, the hallowed halls. With few exceptions, colleges tended to look hard at their curricula and their teaching and learning across the board only in times of crisis such as financial exigency.

Not surprisingly, when regional accrediting agencies began to press for more objective, accountable assessment of academic achievement in the early 1990s, there was much resistance in liberal arts colleges. In a 1993 letter to the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the chairs of the deans' councils of ACM and the Great Lakes Colleges Association declared, "we understand the contribution that institutional assessment will make to our capacity to sustain our quality. Yet it must be our own mission and philosophy of education that shape the means by which we assess our work." For a full decade thereafter, the colleges and the regional accrediting agencies were engaged in academic dialogue



somewhat reminiscent of the Mideast peace process. Faculty members resented the external pressure to comply and dreaded the pro forma busywork that assessment seemed to entail. In the main, they simply did not want to put their minds to this matter; they wanted to teach and write. The question of educational accountability continued to be an active issue for the regional agencies and at all levels of government. They persisted in pressing the colleges to respond. As is often the case, deans were repeatedly caught in the middle.

Little by little, however, there developed remarkably productive convergent movement. Some of this movement was made through faculty concession and agency compromise. Everyone wants students to learn, and no one wants to put colleges out of business. But at least as important have been changes initiated by faculty members themselves. Interest in writing across the curriculum has brought faculty together for lively discussions about learning; instructional technologists and librarians have combined forces with faculty members to highlight the importance of information literacy; interdisciplinary programs have grown apace; the notion of experiential learning has created a conceptual umbrella for everything from hands-on science and internships to service learning and study abroad; and partly as a result of research like that undertaken in the engagement project, quantitative reasoning is now on the table.

None of these categories is entirely new in liberal arts colleges, but their combined prominence marks a real shift. Finding a place for these undertakings in a crowded curriculum has forced faculty members to rethink curricular priorities and developmental implications in student learning, which in turn has made it more plausible to talk about assessment—and about the value of all those skills and capacities in later life. Turning the old definition of liberal arts learning on its head, the courses and majors in the catalogue have increasingly become the vehicles and pathways for new emphases on process-oriented learning, providing a wealth of subject-matter knowledge on the side. Along the way, distribution requirements as we once knew them are gradually becoming a phenomenon of the past. The result is a new holistic vision of undergraduate education whose implementation makes wonderfully concrete an abstract ideal as old as the

founding of our earliest colleges—that of sending graduates into the world as beneficiaries and practitioners of the liberal arts.

Conversation, community, and the liberal arts

Where are the students in all this? They are at the center, as always, learning what they need to know; and while the best faculty members have regularly taught their students how to learn, because more faculty members are more actively engaged in affirming the learning process their students are better aware of its value here and now. The challenge posed by Humphreys and Davenport is, in effect, being met: faculty and students are shooting the gap together.

Moreover, the ACM engagement project suggests that this is neither a fad nor the same old liberal arts education conveyed in new catchphrases. It is a shift like global warming, but with more positive implications for the place of this education in our larger cultural life. The fact of the project undoubtedly occasioned and facilitated some of the consideration of interdisciplinary, across-the-curriculum initiatives that ACM has recently experienced, but the project was also timely. It clearly spoke to current interests and needs. Faculty members involved in these discussions have come from every working generation and every discipline, and in an industry where faculty professionalization and campus disengagement have appeared to some to threaten the old community of learning, those discussions have induced a new academic interchange, reinforcing academic community of another kind. Appropriately, consortial projects like Engaging Today's Students with the Liberal Arts have both broadened the circle and enriched the discussion.

This was evident in the final ACM engagement conference's concluding activity, the breakout group formulation of putative twenty-first-century mission statements for the small liberal arts college. The rather traditional definition of liberal education that Humphreys and Davenport had presented to the students in their focus groups emphasized empowerment, liberation, and cultivation through a curriculum providing broad exposure and in-depth study. The nine statements provisionally presented at Coe—both playful and deeply serious—emphasized community and collaboration as well as active exploration

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and growth in many contexts. Here is a representative version, for an institution dubbed "Swell College" by its creators:

Swell College educates students to become critical and creative thinkers and productive, informed, and ethical citizens. We inculcate in our students an appreciation for the significance of diverse views, values, cultures, and bodies of knowledge. We engage students in collaborative processes of discovery and invention that provide a basis for a prosperous and meaningful life in a changing world.

No mention of courses or majors, just aims, attitudes, processes, and outcomes. Afterwards, all those ACM faculty members looked at one another and realized that they were describing the colleges that their institutions had, in fact, largely become.

The dialogue will, of course, continue in many quarters. One of the Mellon Foundation's aims in supporting this project was to encourage and enable collaboration across the consortium. This collaboration occurred and will recur as the cross-curricular trends here described gain momentum. Since the Coe conference, ACM has sponsored a consortial workshop on academic advising that sent attendees back to their home campuses with much food for thought. For a second round of campus projects, building in part on the experience of sister institutions, Macalester will develop a Liberal Arts Learning Project, designed to deepen and broaden first-year students' understanding of the purposes, values, and questions integral to a liberal arts education, and Grinnell will design a second-year retreat. In larger and smaller ways, members of ACM are joining with colleges across the nation to affirm and enact the goals of the Association of American Colleges and Universities in both the Greater Expectations initiative and the Liberal Education and America's Promise campaign.

However, collaboration within individual campuses may be the most important element in the new liberal arts interchange. Disciplinary courses, traditional departments, and academic divisions have historically defined and sometimes circumscribed academic culture in small colleges, and they will undoubtedly play significant and substantial roles in liberal

arts education for the foreseeable future. But as suggested above, the new developments in interdisciplinary and skills-

oriented offerings and programs have brought faculty members together in new conversations that have benefited those faculty members, the students they teach, and the institutions they serve. Moreover, as faculty members increasingly consider the developmental aspects of student learning, they will inevitably find themselves in more frequent dialogue with administrative staff members from offices of student life. In settings where other trends have tended to dilute the sense of community that has always distinguished small liberal arts colleges, this new tilt toward collaboration is welcome indeed. □

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NOTE

1. Dennis Damon Moore is one of the coordinators of the ACM/Mellon engagement project. Also coordinating are David Burrows, provost and dean of the faculty at Lawrence University, and Marc Roy, vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty at Coe College, with support from ACM program officer Daniel E. Sack and Carol Trosset, director of institutional research at Hampshire College. Consortial members of the Associated Colleges of the Midwest, founded in 1958, include Beloit College, Carleton College, Coe College, Colorado College, Cornell College, Grinnell College, Knox College, Lake Forest College, Lawrence University, Macalester College, Monmouth College, Ripon College, St. Olaf College, and the College of the University of Chicago.

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